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SUBJECT: Local and European Elections in Ireland: A
Shift to the Left As Ahern Takes A Beating

REFERENCE: Dublin 868

11. (SBU) Summary: Irish PM Bertie Ahern will be recovering from a major political setback when he meets President Bush on June 26. His Fianna Fail party turned in its worst performance since the 1920s in local and European Parliament (EP) elections June 11. The big winners were opposition parties Sinn Fein, Labour, and Fine Gael, all to the left of the current Fianna Fail - Progressive Democrats coalition. Domestic issues appeared to carry the day: while anti-war Labour picked up support, the equally anti-war Greens lost ground, and we believe Sinn Fein's appeal is largely its ability to persuade voters it can deliver public services. Ahern's government, looking towards 2007 general elections, faces a real battle to convince voters it has not lost touch with the people, and will likely realign itself to the center-left. A refocusing on social issues might cause tensions, however, with the pro-enterprise Progressive Democrats. A cabinet reshuffle is now likely to involve wholesale changes in the ministerial line-up. End Summary.

Ahern's Party Gets a Bloody Nose

12. (SBU) PM Ahern did not try to hide the extent of his disappointment when he met the press to answer questions relating to his party's hammering at the polls. Fianna Fail's support fell by eight percent (from 38.9 to 31.9) from the last local elections in 1999 - resulting in a loss of 84 council seats (from 382 to 298). On the European stage, support fell over nine percentage points, leaving the party with three MEP slots instead of six.

Who Gains?

13. (SBU) On the surface, Sinn Fein is the big winner. The party more than doubled its local authority representation from 21 seats to 54, and took its first MEP seat. Analysts attribute this to Sinn Fein going into traditional Fianna Fail heartlands and promoting its anti-establishment platform to voters keen to punish the government for the poor provision of public services. Sinn Fein appears to be widening its support base beyond inner city, working class communities to win seats in rural constituencies. In the words of PM Ahern, "Sinn Fein won this election."

14. (SBU) On the surface, Ahern is correct. However, it should be remembered that Sinn Fein was starting from a very low position. The party only began to seriously look at electoral politics in the "South" in the late 1990s and as a result had few local authority seats outside Dublin and the Border counties prior to last week. Emboff heard predictions from senior Irish figures that Sinn Fein would turn a large number of its new local authority seats into Dail (Irish parliament) seats at the next general election.

Fine Gael: Another Big Winner

15. (SBU) The largest - and most moderate - opposition party, Fine Gael confounded all commentators by staging an impressive rally from its disastrous showing in the 2002 general election. New party leader Enda Kenny has turned the tide, with Fine Gael topping Fianna Fail in the European Parliament with five seats, and only marginally behind Fianna Fail in the number of local authority seats held. While media focus is on Sinn Fein's gains, the government should be equally uneasy over the resurrection of its traditional rival, Fine Gael.

Labour: the Bridesmaid in Future Government?

16. (SBU) The Labour Party also gained ground, picking up 18 extra local authority seats (an increase from 83 to 101). It is difficult to gauge whether the party made much political capital out of its opposition to the Iraq war and the June 26 visit of President Bush war. Labour ran an equally strong platform accusing the government of broken promises on basic services. Labour and Fine Gael's improvement combine to present voters an emerging alternative to the present coalition government, when general elections are held in 2007.

Greens and PDs: Also-Rans

17. (SBU) The Green Party lost both its MEP slots and barely increased its percentage vote in the local authority elections. The party appears to be a spent force for now. The Progressive Democrats did not field any EP candidates, and actually lost local authority seats (a fall from 25 to 19).

Comment: Cabinet Shuffle and Bertie to Brussels?

18. (SBU) While not exactly blaming each other for the government's poor showing, Ahern and Deputy PM (and Progressive Democrat leader) Mary Harney provided very different explanations. Ahern stated that the government must open its ears to public concerns, and hinted that reforms in policy areas such as transportation deregulation may be moderated. In contrast, Deputy PM Harney strongly opined that the speed of reform should be increased. The coalition may experience a bumpy ride for the rest of its term in office, as Ahern makes plans for an expected Cabinet shuffle this fall, and realignment to the left. During a stormy Fianna Fail parliamentary party meeting on June 15, backbench TDs called for the removal of Finance Minister McCreevy, Justice Minister McDowell, Health Minister Martin, and Environment Minister Cullen. However, we suspect that ministers closer to retirement, such as Agriculture Minister Walsh and Defense Minister Smith, are more likely to depart in a shuffle.

19. (SBU) Ahern's poor showing - and the apparent UK and Italian rejection of Belgian PM Verhofstadt - has reignited rumors he may allow himself to be put forward as a compromise candidate for President of the European Commission. Ahern is viewed by many as second in line for the plumb post. If consensus on Verhofstadt's candidature is not forthcoming at European Council Summit June 17-18, pressure will grow on Ahern to put his name forward. Close colleagues of Ahern continue to say this is unlikely, however, and Ahern himself reassured his party again on June 25 that he will lead them into the 2007 general elections.

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